

## ‘Living as Londoners do’

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**‘Living as Londoners do’:**

**Born-again Christian migrants in convivial East London**

**Leslie Fesenmyer, University of Birmingham**

Kenyan Pentecostals attempt to ‘live as Londoners do’ without compromising their devotion to God. They migrated from Kenya to the United Kingdom in the 1990s and early 2000s in the hope of securing their futures. Yet, upon arrival, they faced unexpected challenges, including the high cost of living, racism and social marginalisation, and a constantly changing (im)migration regime. They also encountered people with a diverse array of worldviews, faiths, ways of being, and strategies for securing the future. Many got saved or rededicated themselves to God in the early years following their migration and began attending Kenyan-initiated Pentecostal churches in diverse East London. In this pluralist context, how do these born-again Christians live their religion? How do they reconcile their religious commitments with other aspirations and obligations? More broadly, how might we understand their new and renewed religiosity in this particular socio-historical moment?

In reflecting on these questions during my research, I was struck by my Pentecostal interlocutors’ awareness of Muslims in East London and beyond. Although they saw Muslims’ presence in Britain as a threat to the country’s Christian heritage, they spoke with interest in how their Muslim neighbours, coworkers, and fellow East Londoners navigated life locally. These Pentecostals and Muslims share migrant backgrounds, though many of their Muslim

counterparts migrated to the United Kingdom during an earlier period. They live in the same socially deprived, multicultural boroughs of East London and similar settings elsewhere in Britain where they pursue their desires to become particular kinds of people and create particular kinds of lives for themselves and their families (e.g. Liberatore 2017; Hoque 2019).

The anthropology of Christianity and of Islam have largely developed as separate sub-fields in the anthropology of religion with their respective thematic interests and focus on followers of one tradition. Yet, pluralist settings like East London demand attention to inter-religious coexistence if we are to understand our interlocutors' (religious) subjectivities and lives. Existential anthropology is helpful here, encouraging us to explore how people see themselves and the world, the challenges they face, and how they seek to address them (Jackson 1996, 2005). Given that life-making and meaning-making are inevitably contingent, situational, and ongoing social processes, people continually grapple with the tension between circumstances over which they have little control and their capacity to live those circumstances in various ways (Jackson 2005: x-xi).

In discussing existential anthropology and the study of religion, Jackson and Piette assert that 'to submit to a higher power is not [...] to forfeit one's own agency but to recover it through a relationship with something beyond oneself' (2015: 12). Religion can offer moral guidance and a sense of certainty, providing spiritual solace in the face of an unpredictable and imperfect world. However, it cannot eliminate contradictions and doubt in believers' daily lives (e.g. Schielke 2009; Pelkmans 2013; Daswani 2010). Moreover, religious beliefs, practices, and discourses co-exist with other compelling worldviews and ideologies, which give meaning to daily experiences and preoccupations. In his efforts to understand the complexity of young Muslim men's lives in Egypt, including their inconsistent commitment to Islamic ideals and practice, Schielke (2010) introduced the notion of 'grand schemes' to refer to 'persons, ideas and powers that are understood to be greater than one's ordinary life, located on a higher plane,

distinct from everyday life, and yet relevant as models of living' (2015: 36). In doing so, he claimed that there was 'too much Islam' in the anthropology of Islam (Schielke 2010: 2). More specifically, he criticized the sub-field's tendency for what he saw as an over-focus on pious believers and their cultivation of moral perfection, approached in Foucauldian terms, arguing that it cannot account for the contradictions, ambivalence, and complexity that characterize people's lives (Schielke 2015: 46-51, 390).

In this article, I borrow the concept of 'grand schemes', which comes out of the anthropology of Islam, in an effort to understand my born-again Christian interlocutors' (religious) subjectivities and lives. However, unlike Schielke, I am not suggesting that there is too much Christianity in the anthropology of Christianity. In fact, interrogating the tension between living one's life according to the Word of God and navigating daily struggles and contradictions is an important focus in the anthropology of Christianity (e.g. Robbins 2004; Daswani 2015; Author 2016).<sup>1</sup> Rather, I would suggest that there are too many Christians, particularly in settings like pluralist East London. Phrased differently, there is not enough attention given to the religious and non-religious others who populate the lifeworlds of Christians and, in turn, how inter-religious coexistence shapes their subjectivities and lives. Taking a relational approach, I suggest that Kenyan Pentecostals' encounters historically, globally, and locally with religious (and non-religious) others contribute to Pentecostalism's salience in their lives in this socio-historical moment. And, their imaginings and observations of and (historical) coexistence with multiple others, particularly Muslims, are crucial for understanding how they live (together).

Drawing on the notion of lived religion to explore 'what people *do* with religious idioms, how they use them, what they make of themselves and their worlds with them, and how, in turn, men, women and children are fundamentally shaped by the worlds they are making' (Orsi 2003: 172, emphasis in original), I focus on the immediate practice of living and the

existential and pragmatic concerns which inform doing so. In East London, diversity is ‘commonplace’, an everyday part of life whereby the normative expectation is to coexist civilly, showing at least a degree of openness to people perceived as ‘different’ (Wessendorf 2014). Nonetheless, this openness does not preclude tension, nor does it necessitate sustained exchange or presume harmonious relations. In fact, such settings are often conceptualised as convivial spaces whereby exchange coexists with exclusion, tolerance with discrimination (Gilroy 2004; Nowicka and Vertovec 2013; Nyamnjoh 2015). ‘Living as Londoners do’ in this convivial context, I propose, is a mode of agonistic belonging arising from these born-again Christians sharing their lifeworlds with religious and non-religious others (cf. Das 2013: 77). In such a setting, Pentecostalism offers them the means to live as ‘good’ Christians and strive for material success. These ways of being thus reflect their efforts to create ‘viable forms of existence and coexistence’ in order to shape the world into which they have been thrown (Jackson 2005: x, xii). Not only are ‘non-religious’ grand schemes relevant to their lives, but, importantly, so is a religious one.

The article is based on ethnographic research in Kenyan-initiated Pentecostal churches and among congregants in East London between 2014 and 2016, while also drawing on my long-term engagement with Kenyans in London and their families in Kenya since 2009. Fieldwork included regularly attending services, participating in church events and activities, and spending time with people outside of church, as well as reviewing religious texts written by and circulated among Kenyan Pentecostals. The article begins by detailing the context of Kenyans’ migration to the United Kingdom, paying particular attention to how those coming of age in the 1990s made sense of the generational predicament they faced and how migration emerged as a means to securing their futures. In subsequent sections, I consider Pentecostalism and its entwinement with other ‘grand schemes’, while also exploring how these born-again Christians try to ‘live as Londoners do’ without compromising their devotion to God. In doing

so, I consider historical, transnational, and local aspects of their coexistence with Muslims that inform how they live (together) in East London.<sup>2</sup> I also highlight how, by embodying the prosperity gospel, they try to navigate the irreconcilable tensions and contradictions such coexistence entails.

### **How to progress in life: Multiple ‘grand schemes’**

Women and men coming of age in urban Kenya in the 1990s were eager to complete their educations, secure their livelihoods, and marry and start families. In the dominant social imaginary (Taylor 2002), they saw personal and social development as linked to educational qualifications. These were in turn understood as convertible into positions of middle-class social status in terms of income, lifestyle, and occupation. At the time though, Kenya was mired in political and economic instability and social uncertainty, which threatened the modernist project of development. Multi-party elections, introduced in 1992, triggered violence and displacement and further politicised ethnic differences. Meanwhile, the expansion of educational opportunities coincided with the (re-)introduction of fees, putting education out of reach of many young people. The increasing inaccessibility of this normative pathway to adulthood thwarted this generation’s efforts to attain social maturity (Prince 2006; Frederiksen 2002).

How did those coming of age make sense of their predicament? ‘Grand schemes’, that is, worldviews, ideologies, discourses, and faiths, can be ‘evoked to navigate the complexities of life: the horizons, the social relations, the promises, the pressures, the necessities, the desires, the fashions and the discussions that together make up in a given moment what is important, what is possible, what can and what needs to be done and thought’ (Schielke and Debevec 2012: 9). For young Kenyans, their experiences in the 1990s undermined their confidence that the promises of the ‘grand schemes’ of modernity and development would materialise for their

generation as they had for an older one, giving rise to an urban middle class post-independence (Stichter 1988; cf. Ferguson 1999). Some were attracted to Pentecostalism with its emphasis on a personal relationship with God and its messages of success and victory if one put one's faith in God. Having God's favour would ensure the physical health and material wealth the prosperity gospel promises. However, although Pentecostalism was gaining popularity in Kenya at the time (Gifford 2009), it was not until after migrating to London that most people I worked with began attending Pentecostal churches. Instead, in telling their migration stories, they described their inability to progress in life in the 1990s as linked to the 'backwardness' of Kenya. In other words, the challenges they faced were place-specific, whereby Kenya and other nations were understood as being on a single path toward development such that 'geographical differences (real, coexisting differences) [... were] transformed into places in a historical queue' (Massey 2006: 49). Migration to a place 'ahead' of Kenya in the 'queue' like the United Kingdom beckoned.

The long history of circular migration between Kenya and the United Kingdom notwithstanding, Kenyans began migrating in greater numbers to the United Kingdom from the late 1980s through the early 2000s, with most arriving during the 1990s. In their late teens and early 20s at the time of migration, my interlocutors migrated from working and middle-class families in Nairobi and in towns and villages in peri-urban Kiambu adjacent to the capital. They did so to pursue their studies and to find work, the promise of migration having renewed their belief in the 'grand schemes' of development and modernity.

### **Becoming Pentecostal**

The London which migrant Kenyans encountered in the years following their arrival was not the place of opportunity and possibility they imagined it would be. Instead, the promises of modernity proved elusive there too, and many saw their dreams of securing educational degrees

and well-paying jobs thwarted. The cleaning, social care, security, and hospitality jobs they initially seized became occupational traps, rather than stepping stones. At the same time, their migration coincided with significant changes in the British (im)migration regime, making more difficult to obtain permanent residency (Shah 2000). Though they had not migrated with the intention of settling, their struggles to realize their aspirations heightened the social and material stakes. While many have succeeded in regularizing their legal status, it has been an arduous, protracted, and increasingly expensive process; inevitably, some remain undocumented. Legal uncertainty, if not precarity, has contributed to undermining their efforts to secure their futures.

Raised in the Anglican, Presbyterian, Catholic, and Methodist churches of their parents, migrant Kenyans initially gravitated to mainline churches in London, but they were put off by ‘uninspired services that did not speak to their lives’. Although they may have expected to be racially different from most people in London, they assumed that, as Christians, they would nonetheless be religiously familiar. Yet experiences of racialisation, along with social marginalisation, suggest that race trumped religion. Compounding the situation has been a growing antipathy toward migrants in the United Kingdom in the intervening years.

In the face of disappointment and disillusionment, a handful of Kenyan men, together with those who recognized their callings, began to establish Pentecostal churches during the 2000s (Author 2018); the ‘turn’ to religion can be seen as both contributing to and reflecting a resurgence of religion globally (Kepel 1994). By 2014 there were 17 Kenyan-initiated Pentecostal churches in Greater London, with more than half located in East London. Pentecostalism’s appeal to these migrants is manifold. Pastors seek to make the Word of God relevant to congregants’ everyday lives, a practice that the Pentecostal image of a non-judging, loving God facilitates. Moreover, Pentecostalism offers a sense of certainty and moral guidance, while helping believers to re-narrativise their lives. In becoming born-again, converts engage in individual acts of repentance and submission that entail ‘breaking with the past’ and



rejecting their old lives (Meyer 1998). In their projects of modern Christian self-making, they engage in various self-development activities, ranging from pursuing formal education degrees and attending parenting and business seminars, to engaging in goal-setting exercises intended to facilitate the realization of their aspirations. Because the 'grand scheme' of Pentecostalism transcends daily trials and difficulties, the setbacks they face do not undermine its credibility and legitimacy, though this does not mean these born-again Christians are free from doubt.

Part of forging modern selves entails identifying as Christians. In relinquishing other bases of identity, Pentecostals seek to disregard differences of race, class, and national origin in social relations and, in doing so, shed the distinctly unmodern 'tribalism' they associate with some of their Kenyan counterparts. Kenyan-initiated Pentecostal churches reflect this cosmopolitan outlook through their self-presentation as multicultural congregations and in their participation in transnational religious networks.<sup>3</sup> They invite evangelists and gospel singers to speak and perform at their churches, just as pastors and lay leaders travel to Europe and the United States to visit (Kenyan-initiated) Pentecostal churches. These religious networks facilitate believers' identification with a global Christian community such that, at least in their self-positioning, they transcend the limits of locality and their own socially inferior and racialised position.

The experience of Joseph, a man in his early 40s, is illustrative of how Pentecostalism coexists with and interpenetrates other grand schemes, namely, modernity, consumer capitalism, and education and social mobility, in making sense of one's life and pursuing middle-class respectability. However, this is not to say these schemes are similar to one another or that the differences between them can be collapsed in practice. Rather, they each have their own logics, modes of being, visions of the future, and means of securing it, from which these born-again Christians selectively incorporate aspects into their own visions of their lives and strategies for creating them (cf. Schielke 2010: 11-12, 14). After studying for a year in London,

Joseph found that, he could not afford to continue studying on his delivery driver's salary. He became depressed as he saw his dreams – of becoming a banker and of living a materially comfortable life – slip away. In his testimonies and in conversation, Joseph described 'drinking heavily and staying out late', a time, when he 'wasn't the husband and father God knew he could be'. Though raised an Anglican, he doubted his God, a scepticism the 'different religions and ideas' he encountered in London fed. Frustrated with her husband's behaviour, his wife insisted he attend church with her and their two children. Much to Joseph's surprise, he found solace there; not long after, he accepted Jesus, gave up drinking, and immersed himself in church activities. The lack of formal hierarchy in Pentecostal churches has enabled Joseph to take on progressively more responsibilities. Now a lay leader, he periodically opens services and organises activities for other men in the congregation. Eventually training as a teacher, he said he 'loves to use his story to help others see they aren't alone'.

Pentecostalism for migrant Kenyans emerges as a 'highly immediate [and ongoing] practice of making sense of one's life' (Schielke and Debevec 2012: 1). Notably, key aspects of Pentecostalism's appeal – a new way of becoming modern through religious practice and access to international networks and 'modern' lifestyles, and religious guidance about how to live their lives – are among the characteristics that Brian Larkin and Birgit Meyer identify as being shared with reformist Islam (2006: 287-288). Both religions generate 'social imaginaries which thrive on religion's ability to render meaningful the unstable and often depressing flux of life' (Larkin and Meyer 2006: 287). While they were referring to life in West Africa, much the same can be said about life in the socially deprived areas of London where Kenyan Pentecostals and Muslims predominate. In Newham, where many settled and where ethnic minorities are the majority, residents have fewer qualifications, earn less, and have shorter life expectancies, compared to London and national averages (LBN 2010). 'Succeeding' in this setting – through educational attainment or steady employment – entails defying these statistics

and the structural conditions they reflect. Having God's favour is a crucial ingredient for success. Accordingly, I would suggest that Kenyan Pentecostals' new and renewed religiosity be understood as relationally constituted in this particular social context and historical moment.

### **Making sense of the present: Coexistence in Kenya and East London**

Since the 1990s, religion has become a salient idiom for Kenyan Pentecostals in trying to make sense of the present, particularly its tensions and conflicts. To understand why and what it means for coexistence in East London requires thinking historically and transnationally. Kenya has a long-standing Muslim population and, while Muslims predominate on the coast, they constitute a minority nationally.<sup>4</sup> Although Christian-Muslim relations have historically not included overt conflict, tensions began to rise in the 1990s following the collapse of Somalia (Gifford 2009). The situation worsened with the 1998 bombing of the American embassy in Nairobi. The event had life-changing consequences for would-be migrants like Joseph who had initially hoped to move to the United States. Unable to apply for a U.S. student visa in Nairobi, he travelled to London instead and applied for an American visa there. However, when his application was rejected, he decided to pursue his studies in London. Retrospectively making sense of his post-migration life, Joseph believes 'staying in [the] UK was part of God's plan for him'.

Following the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks in the United States, there were attacks on a beach hotel and airplane near Mombasa in 2002 (Seesemann 2007) and, more recently, there have been numerous violent incidents around the country. During the 2000s, worries about Muslims also took the form of political anxiety, particularly regarding efforts at constitutional reform, which included the codification of Kadhis courts in the constitution. Although the courts have

been operating since before independence in 1963, Christian leaders were outspoken in their worries that codifying them would mark ‘the introduction of sharia through the backdoor’ (Mwakimako 2007: 290).

Meanwhile, in Newham, Kenyan Pentecostals express a sense that Muslims are omnipresent. Notably, although there are 47 mosques, Newham is also home to 93 Pentecostal churches, more than any other borough (as cited in Rogers 2013: 118).<sup>5</sup> While the borough’s Muslim population is significant – over 2.5 times larger than that of London and more than 6 times that of England (Aston Mansfield 2013: 8) – I would suggest that this perception is better understood as arising from their conflation of ‘Asian’ and ‘Muslim’ whereby so-called Asian areas are understood as Muslim ones. In East Ham where 77% of residents are Asian, Muslims predominate, but one in five residents identifies as Hindu.<sup>6</sup> And, Hindu Tamils from Sri Lanka dominate East Ham High Street, the ward’s busiest commercial thoroughfare. Nonetheless, in conversations with Kenyan Pentecostals, the diversity among Asians goes largely unacknowledged, as does the heterogeneity of Muslims and Islam.

The presence of Somalis in Britain and Kenya also contributes to the perception of so-called Muslim omnipresence. Following Somalia’s collapse in 1991, Somalis sought asylum in the United Kingdom in the 1990s, coinciding with the timing of much Kenyan migration there. In talking with Kenyans about the early years after migration, the figure of the ‘Somali’ ‘taking advantage’ of the asylum system to ‘get ahead’ arose. Since Muslims in Kenya include those who are ethnically Somali, some Somali Kenyans, as they are referred to, are believed to have entered Britain on Kenyan passports, only to have discarded them and claimed asylum as ‘Somalis’. At the time, the British asylum system offered much needed housing and financial support otherwise unavailable to migrants (Shah 2000). Against the backdrop of their own unsuccessful efforts to gain asylum, Kenyans express resentment toward the presumed success of Somali asylum claims, with some attributing it to the privilege and protection they believe

Muslims benefit from generally.<sup>7</sup> Thus, in the United Kingdom, Kenyan Pentecostals perceive that Muslim migrants can claim (legal) belonging on religious grounds, while they themselves cannot despite their alignment with Britain's Christian heritage.

In addition to seeking asylum in Britain, many Somalis settled in the Nairobi estate of Eastleigh following Somalia's collapse. In the intervening years since my interlocutors migrated, the Nairobi cityscape and its surrounding areas have changed dramatically with new buildings and blocks of flats rising daily on what was once open space. Although a joint World Bank-Interpol report (2013) attributes the building boom to remittances and more readily available credit, interlocutors in both Kenya and London believe Somali 'pirate money' has remade the city's built environment, making it both unaffordable and unrecognizable.

Since the 1990s, the global flow of news and images has only intensified, and transnational ties have become easier to maintain. These born-again Christians follow and identify with events occurring in Kenya and elsewhere. During services, pastors call on their members to pray for their fellow Christians fleeing religious persecution. In the wake of numerous recent violent incidents in Kenya, Britain, and Europe more generally since 2015, they are accustomed to contacting relatives to ensure they are safe, while condemning the 'Muslims' who claim responsibility for these acts.

### *Muslims as 'example' and 'threat'*

Although most Kenyan Pentecostals do not regularly interact with Muslims in substantive ways, cohabitation affords them opportunities to see how their Muslim counterparts navigate life in convivial East London. They not only imagine Muslims to be omnipresent, but also to have influence in British society. Evidence of so-called Muslim influence can be found, for example, in the availability of halal meat in state schools, which the media reported some schools were

feeding students without consulting or notifying their parents.<sup>8</sup> The apparently seamless integration of this religious imperative into the education system struck several parents as ‘very worrying’, which might be likened to a British example of ‘sharia through the backdoor’. Another example that arose during fieldwork is the seeming public acceptance of veiling by Muslim women in stark contrast to Christians wearing crosses. The suspension of a British Airways employee for refusing to remove her cross at work generated particular frustration. One interlocutor wondered ‘who is in power’ if such inconsistencies could exist; the implicit answer was Muslims or, at least, that they had the ear of those in power. In 2013 when the European Court of Human Rights decided in the employee’s favour, several interlocutors expressed their sense of vindication.<sup>9</sup>

Although sources of frustration, such instances also serve as examples which Kenyan Pentecostals seek to emulate to ensure Christian practices and symbols are afforded similar public accommodations. One pastor spoke admiringly of Muslims’ success in establishing madrassas, which provide a vital religious context for their children’s education and a space for Islamic teachings. Given the formative role of education, he, too, would like to start a school. If they could reach children, the pastor said, there would be little or no need for them to ‘break from the past’ (Meyer 1998) as he himself had to do. Madrassas, thus, put Muslims ahead of Christians in terms of nurturing the next generation. Moreover, founding such a school would circumvent the possibility that these Christian children of African heritage would encounter racism in schools or face teachers’ low racialized expectations, thereby hindering them from reaching their potential (cf. Vincent et al. 2012: 266).

The allowances which Muslims appear to enjoy in Britain engender envy and fear in Kenyan Pentecostals who read them as expressions of British society’s accommodation of Islam, which they in part attribute to ‘moral depravity’ in Britain. As argued elsewhere (Author 2016), they are critical of British pub culture, divorce rates, and the acceptance of

homosexuality. Compounding matters are the efforts of local councils to maintain a secular stance in their dealings with residents of faith (Christians in Parliament 2013). Kenyan Pentecostals do not perceive the secularity underlying British multiculturalism as neutral, but rather as privileging non-religious worldviews, while ensuring ‘Muslim’ views are well represented. Together, Christian laxity and British multiculturalism are thought to afford Muslims the freedom to live their religion as they wish, further undermining Britain’s Christian heritage. In these ways, ‘Muslims’ are simultaneously a threat to be thwarted nationally and an example of how to live locally in convivial East London.

### **‘Living as Londoners do’**

In light of these local, national (Kenyan and British), and transnational backdrops to Christian-Muslim coexistence in East London, what do Kenyan Pentecostals mean by ‘living as Londoners do’? Let me begin with a vignette: arriving for a Sunday service in Dagenham, a suburban East London borough, in 2014, I saw two church members affixing the church’s vinyl banner with its name and service times to the school fence. A similar banner hung alongside it – advertising a mosque. Because affordable worship space is hard to secure in London, it is not uncommon for Christians and Muslims to rent rooms in the same community centres and schools. Talking with the pastor’s wife after the service, I asked how she felt about having services in the same building as a mosque. She shrugged, ‘this is how it is. It’s part of why we’d like our own building.... They’re free to worship wherever they want, but it’s strange for us to be doing it in the same place.’

Though she found it ‘strange’, she did not deny their right to be there. Not only is this kind of coexistence commonplace, but so is the pastor’s wife’s tacit acceptance – the latter being central to what Kenyan Pentecostals mean when they say they try to ‘live as Londoners do’. In London, they do not expect everyone to be ‘like them’. In many instances, the city’s

diversity is seen in a positive light. For example, while Kenyan food is typically served at church gatherings, many families cook a range of cuisines; if they dine out, they might make a special point of eating at Nando's, a South African restaurant chain, but may also choose fish and chips or Chinese takeaway. An openness to different cultural heritages and national backgrounds is a disposition parents seek to cultivate in their children, hoping to ensure their success wherever and among whomever they find themselves. One church, for example, holds an international day annually to celebrate church members' backgrounds and diversity more broadly, encouraging church youth to perform different national dances and songs, whether their own or others. This religiously-inspired cosmopolitanism resonates with secular middle-class views of openness as a form of cultural capital in Britain (Bennett et al. 2009: 186-187).

Kenyan Pentecostals' reactions to the 2016 election of Sadiq Khan, a man of Muslim Pakistani heritage, as mayor of London reflects another dimension of what it means to 'live as Londoners do'. These born-again Christians believe it is important to accept that someone who does not share their background can serve as their elected representative. Accepting Khan allows them to distance themselves, at least discursively, from what they refer to as the 'backward tribalism' of Kenya where many still vote along ethnic lines, while asserting their own modernity. Notably, Khan's success reflects a perceived electoral solidarity among British Muslims, marking another example to emulate.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, having a Muslim mayor tests their resolve. As a married woman with two children said to me not long after Khan's election, she 'wants to believe what he says now that he's in office'. She likes his policies but worries 'about his ties to extremism'.

The Kenyan Pentecostal notion of 'living as Londoners do' entails being modern, open, and tolerant. Being modern, especially in pluralist London, entails being open to people of different backgrounds. Coexisting, though, does not necessarily mean engaging in sustained interaction. This in itself cannot automatically be read as prejudiced since it is not common for



strangers, regardless of their backgrounds, to greet each other in London. Here though, these born-again Christians' openness coexists uneasily with their social conservatism, attitude of moral condemnation toward secular British society, and wariness toward Muslims, all of which are out of step with modern values of tolerance and acceptance (cf. Krause 2011). Nonetheless, the demeanour typical of many city dwellers – maintaining distance – which they seek to adopt in 'living like Londoners', facilitates agonistic coexistence.

### **Seeing is believing: Embodying the prosperity gospel**

As they try to be 'good' Christians, while 'living as Londoners', Pentecostal thought and practice offer a mode of being that allows them to navigate the contradictions, tensions, and inconsistencies of everyday life. The Pentecostal imaginary sees the world as torn between God and demonic forces, a site of spiritual warfare between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness. 'The Pentecostal imaginary of the world and personal experience are made to reinforce each other. A person's experience of an inner struggle with, or even possession by, a demonic force affirms the truthfulness of the imaginary of the cosmic war' (Meyer 2010: 118). This 'tight linkage between experience and embodiment' and 'imaginary and cosmology' means that the ways in which an afflicted person contends with his or her demons are also appropriate and effective ways to combat demonic assaults in the wider world (Meyer 2010: 118). Accordingly, Pentecostalism holds that one can re-make the world by remaking oneself because interior and personal changes are believed to reverberate outward (Marshall 2009).

The prosperity gospel is central to Kenyan Pentecostalism (Gifford 2009; Deacon and Lynch 2013). As God's children, believers are understood to enjoy the benefit of His favour here on earth. Accordingly, it is God's will for believers to be rich, healthy, and successful whereby one's success is understood as a sign of God's favour. Through 'positive confession', believers lay claim to God's promises and provisions. Kenyan Pentecostals believe they will

achieve success through prayer and deliverance, as well as hard work and diligent self-cultivation.

If speaking is believing for Pentecostals (Harding 1987), seeing is also believing. The animating idea is ‘be your message, don’t give your message’. Kenyan Pentecostals’ attention to physical appearances illustrates how the prosperity gospel can be embodied as a mode of being in the world; and, in its relative unobtrusiveness, it aligns easily with their ideas of living as tolerant, open Londoners. As part of their born-again self-image, they place great emphasis on maintaining a neat appearance that conveys their ‘success’ and social status, while also resonating with notions of middle-class respectability (cf. Vincent et al. 2012: 269). Looking attractive and being physically healthy are taken as signs of God’s blessing. Sunday services are ideal for witnessing this concern with appearance because it is more pronounced than during the rest of the week. While wearing one’s ‘Sunday best’ is a widely observed practice across Christian denominations, some Kenyan Pentecostals, particularly pastors, take that sentiment to another, higher, level. At a service, I encountered a pastor and his wife dressed in formal wear, he in a dark tuxedo and she in a shimmery gold evening gown. To my mind, such attire seemed more suited to a ball. I would suggest that, by dressing like this, they claimed their position as materially wealthy, successful people. As a pastor couple, they also signalled to their members that they had God’s favour, which the latter could gain in part through their affiliation with the church. At the same time, it is an apologetic to those of other faiths and to non-believing others.

Concerns with appearance and respectability must also be understood vis-à-vis Kenya and British society. It is common in Nairobi for people to distance themselves from associations with poverty, for example, by cleaning one’s shoes of dust and mud, so as not to reveal that they walked, rather than drove, to their destination. Relatedly, after spending her childhood walking many miles back and forth to school each day, one woman I know insisted on driving

everywhere, explaining ‘why walk if I don’t have to?’ Beyond that, their neat, respectable appearance refutes any association with the relative poverty of Kenya globally and their racialization as ‘poor’ African migrants in Britain. In distinguishing themselves from those who are poor, they reveal an awareness of being the objects of others’ imaginations. Their awareness intimates the continuing salience of a global power hierarchy, which positions non-white people from geopolitically weak countries at the bottom, to their understanding of their own social positioning (Massey 1993).

Just as the aforementioned couple’s fancy attire conveys their seeming material success, their air of wellbeing is thought to inspire curiosity in others to know how they have achieved success and, importantly, who the God is who helps them thrive (Author 2019). Integral to their belief in the prosperity gospel is their commitment to identifying and cultivating their unique talents so as to excel in their chosen field, inspire others, and create opportunities for others to succeed. This is a form of evangelizing that enables believers to cultivate their own dedication to God through the ongoing disciplining of the self, while reaching out to others without explicitly talking about Jesus (Maier 2012: 184-85). In this way, they can indirectly attempt to save souls all the time, making every setting and situation a ‘mission field’.

Because living in London requires Kenyan Pentecostals to navigate different settings, they also need to re-calibrate their religiosity. To grasp their recalibration, one can compare how they express their faith in pluralist spaces like restaurants and shops, or on the street or bus, where the focus is on exuding an air of health, wellbeing, and material comfort, to the very different mode of being adopted in church where outbursts of emotion are welcome signs of the Holy Spirit’s presence. While praying, some congregants stand, gesticulating to God and speaking in tongues. Others sit with their eyes closed and pound their thighs as they proclaim Jesus as their savior. Still, others pace, arms raised, palms facing outward, calling out to God.

In this context, affect is a manifestation of God. To ‘live as Londoners do’, Pentecostals thus accommodate themselves to different settings.

If seeing is believing, it is worth asking who they want to ‘see’ them living as Christians. God is their primary audience, so to speak, such that their ways of being are forms of witnessing, which express gratitude for everything He has done in their lives. Another audience is other Christians, particularly at church where they engage in collective (self-) scrutiny. Those of other faiths and no faith constitute a third audience, seemingly the most important given their evangelizing mission. These multiple ‘audiences’ inevitably exhibit varying degrees of attentiveness, over which they can exert little control. Though an apparent impediment to their mission, Simon Coleman comments that salvation is not achieved through direct, extended social contact with ‘unsaved Others’; rather, ‘only the *rhetorical* presence of the unsaved person is actually necessary’ (2003: 21, italics in original). This point is revealing of how Kenyan Pentecostals can ‘live as Londoners do’ without compromising their devotion to God.

## **Conclusion**

In establishing themselves in London, migrant Kenyans were drawn to Pentecostalism, which offers them moral guidance regarding how to live as ‘good’ Christians. Yet, as they strive to attain success and salvation, living in convivial East London has posed various challenges, including the inevitability of living alongside religious and non-religious others. Their curiosity about and awareness of Muslims suggests that, despite the self-proclaimed incommensurability of their religions, they believe they can learn from how their Muslim neighbours ‘live’ their religion, whether through founding madrassas, achieving electoral success, or ensuring their religious symbols and practices are publicly accommodated.

As fellow migrants, racially and/or religiously other-ed in London, their predicaments are not dissimilar, nor are some of their preoccupations. Jackson and Piette’s comment, cited

earlier, resonates: through their respective relationships to a higher being, Pentecostals and Muslims (re-)claim their agency, rather than relinquish it, thereby enabling them to project themselves into the world. Yet, we also know that the certainty and moral guidance religion offers do not eliminate the ambiguity and contradictions in daily life. In discussing ‘the existential primacy of lived knowledge’, Jackson comments that ‘the meaning of practical knowledge lies in what is accomplished through it, not in what conceptual order may be said to underlie or precede it’ (Jackson 1996: 34). Kenyan Pentecostals’ lived knowledge of how to strive toward a meaningful future and salvation, while living in London, entails ‘living together’ with religious and non-religious others in a mode of agonistic belonging. This knowledge highlights the relationality of ways of being, regardless of what religious beliefs might hold at textual and discursive levels and, as such, necessitates navigating and living with contradictions in everyday life.

Relatedly, Kenyan Pentecostals are not the only ones doing the imagining; rather, they are aware of how ‘others’ imagine them such that embodying Pentecostal values and beliefs, such as, the prosperity gospel, must be read both as a means of expressing their belief in being God’s children and a refutation of their racialization as African migrants. Moreover, their efforts to ‘live as Londoners do’ illustrates their sensitivity to alternate ways of being to which they accommodate themselves. Their embrace of Pentecostalism is in part shaped by the logic and values of modernity, consumer capitalism, and education and social mobility. Pentecostalism can thus be understood to entwine with these so-called grand schemes, re-casting how they are selectively drawn upon to secure the future.

In trying to grasp the complexity of these born-again Christians’ lives, I have used the notion of ‘grand schemes’ to accommodate the salience of ‘non-religious’ ideas, discourses, and ideologies, which might otherwise go unnoticed if the focus was solely on their Christianity and Christian striving. If, in other words, we were to follow a more Foucauldian approach and

focus on discourses, strategies, and (pious) self-cultivation, then we are likely to miss the ambivalence, doubt, and contradictions that characterize many believers' lives, including how they navigate uncertainty (cf. Schielke 2015: 390). However, as my work with Kenyan Pentecostals in East London shows, it is not only 'non-religious' grand schemes that are relevant here, but also another religion. Hence, in the anthropology of Christianity, there are arguably too many Christians, especially when studying pluralist settings where it is important to acknowledge religious, as well as non-religious, others in their midst.

With its emphasis on living with the tension between the circumstances in which people find themselves and their variable capacities to make meaningful lives, existential anthropology allows us to hold the lives of Christians and Muslims in pluralist settings in view simultaneously, while also accommodating non-religious concerns and aspirations, logics and values. Moreover, it helps to carve out common ground between the anthropology of Christianity and of Islam by foregrounding human preoccupations with family and the future. In doing so, it has the potential to enable anthropologists of both sub-fields to account more fully for the shared empirical realities of our interlocutors and to draw upon theoretical concepts across disciplinary sub-fields in order to gain a deeper understanding of people's lifeworlds.

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<sup>1</sup> In assessing the state of the anthropology of Christianity as a sub-field, Joel Robbins notes that anthropologists of Christianity have largely concerned themselves with those who self-consciously identify as Christians, rather than 'people who live in settings where Christianity is dominant but they themselves are indifferent', and asks what might be learned from research on 'ambivalent or only tenuously committed Christians' (2014: S166). This can be read in some ways as an argument that there is 'too much Christianity' in the sub-field.

<sup>2</sup> Coexistence refers both to living side by side in East London and to a more abstract sense of coexistence manifested in their imaginings of Muslims nationally in Kenya and Britain, as well as globally.

<sup>3</sup> In addition to a preponderance of Kenyans, many congregations include other Africans and some white British and Caribbean people.

<sup>4</sup> Estimates range from 6% to 35%, with 20-25% seeming to be a reasonable estimate (Kresse 2009: S77, note 2).

<sup>5</sup> <http://mosques.muslimsinbritain.org/maps.php#/borough/Newham> (accessed 8/06/16).

<sup>6</sup>

<http://www.newham.info/profiles/profile?profileId=167&geoTypeId=8&geoIds=00BBGH&ias.Locale=en-GB#iasProfileSection9> (accessed 23/06/16).

<sup>7</sup> Between 1989 and 1997, Kenyan nationals filed 5,170 applications for asylum, of which only 30 were successful (Watson and Danzelman 1998), though there is good reason to believe many more claims were legitimate (Asylum Aid 2001).

<sup>8</sup> See, for example,

[http://www.guardianseries.co.uk/news/10334813.Halal\\_meat\\_served\\_in\\_three\\_quarters\\_of\\_council\\_supported\\_schools/](http://www.guardianseries.co.uk/news/10334813.Halal_meat_served_in_three_quarters_of_council_supported_schools/) (no longer posted);

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2623860/Now-halal-sneaks-schools-Parents-angered-councils-ban-pork-sausages-bacon-replace-ritually-slaughtered-meat.html> Accessed 29 June 2016.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/law/2013/jan/15/ba-rights-cross-european-court> (accessed 24/06/16).

<sup>10</sup> One Kenyan Pentecostal I know has enjoyed electoral success in London, to the great pride of her co-religionists and co-nationals.